

Policy Research Brief

Designing for System Change: Locally Informed Mapping of We Love Reading's Impact on Agency and Life Satisfaction, and the Enablers Behind Its Long-Term Success.



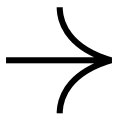
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We Love Reading Program

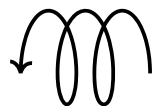
Executive Summary



We Love Reading is a community-led program that not only fosters a love of reading among children through read-aloud sessions but also enhances the human flourishing and well-being of its volunteers, known as We Love Reading Ambassadors.

Community-engaged research reveals that the program drives multiple dimensions of agency and life satisfaction among WLR Ambassadors. At the same time, their intrinsic motivation and commitment on one hand and the program's flexibility and simplicity on the other hand have been key enablers of its long-term success. Systematically understanding impact and sustainability factors is essential for policymakers, intervention designers, and program evaluators to develop more effective, scalable, and community-driven initiatives.

Introduction



What's at Stake

Many volunteer-based interventions are designed to benefit the communities they serve, yet few are mutually beneficial, fostering positive impacts for both the community and the volunteers—who are valuable assets and essential to their success. Such programs are often framed as empowering without a systematic investigation of what this means from a local perspective, how change happens systemically, and for whom and to which aspects a program is considered transformative. Similarly, there is limited research published on development, and implementation of these programs, which are best captured through the same cultural lens to create a feeling of mutual ownership of the program and to understand the process by which various factors interact to impact program effectiveness and sustainability.

To address this gap, this policy outlines findings from two research studies that engaged Jordanians and Syrian WLR Ambassadors—the first on WLR's impact and local perception of two constructs: women's agency as the power to originate actions, and life satisfaction, often associated with human well-being and flourishing and is a

key indicator in program evaluations; and the second on the program's design and implementation that ensured its long-term success. Future programs that wish to attain long-term sustainability may benefit from We Love Reading as a case study of how to use participatory approaches to establish a solid ground for effective initiative design as well as impact tracing and realization.

About the We Love Reading Program



The We Love Reading Program was established in 2006 by Dr. Rana Dajani. The program aims to change mindsets through reading to nurture changemakers all over the world. The program constitutes training local volunteers to hold read-aloud sessions in public spaces in their neighborhoods in the native language of the child. The program empowers women, men, and youth WLR Ambassadors to become leaders of change, builds ownership in the children and community members, and serves as a platform for raising awareness on global issues.

Research Overview



Objectives

The First Study

The first study that focused on the program's impact has three main goals:

- To show how Jordanian and Syrian women living in Amman articulated concepts of agency and life satisfaction.
- To understand multi levels factors that impact these concepts.
- To explore how We Love Reading program drive change and to which aspects of the system.

Basically, the study aimed to map local knowledge and visualize systems change from the perspective of the local community.

The Second Study

The second study, which focused on the program's design, examined the factors that enhanced its effectiveness.

By using WLR as a case example, the study aims to outline the relevant factors and considerations for developing and implementing local intervention programs.

Methods



The First Study

Four Fuzzy Cognitive Mapping sessions (FCM) were conducted with 31 Syrian and Jordanian women, all were WLR Ambassadors residing in Amman. Fuzzy Cognitive Mapping (FCM) is a participatory approach utilized to create cognitive maps which are visual representations of how groups of respondents perceive the interaction between multiple variables in a certain system. Basically, respondents identified variables, draw connections, and specified relative strength to each causal relationships ranging from -1 (most negative) to +1 (most positive) in value.

As the discussion unfolded, the visually mapped network of variables corresponded to the following questions: what does a sense of agency mean to you? what does life satisfaction mean to you? what and how factors including WLR program influenced these concepts and predicted change.

The Second Study

Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were conducted with 21 participants who either developed the program, served as WLR team members, or volunteered as WLR Ambassadors to implement and deliver WLR's read-aloud sessions for children. The interview questions for the WLR team revolved around how the idea for WLR was developed and formed, the role of the community, challenges faced when developing and implementing the training, as well as potential improvements and barriers to effectiveness. The interview questions for WLR Ambassadors focused on their experience of receiving the training, adapting the program, conducting the read-aloud sessions, parent and child engagement, and the perceived impact of WLR on the volunteers themselves, the children who took part in the sessions, and the community at large.

Analysis & Results



The First Study: We Love Reading Impact on Agency & Life Satisfaction

In the first study, in order to understand how We Love Reading program impact the system of agency and life satisfaction mapped by the participating women, it was important first to localize fundamental knowledge by answering **what does agency and life satisfaction mean to them**, the discussion was undergone thematic analysis.

Localizing Knowledge

Agency

During the four sessions, women identified a total of 12 meanings of agency, concluded in Figure 1 below:

<p>Freedom</p> <p>Agency was embodied in the notion of personal freedom, whether freedom of action, freedom of speech, or freedom of expression.</p>	<p>Independence</p> <p>Agency rested on self-reliance, "to act in whatever way I choose, without any pressure from anyone or any circumstance," and "not allowing my actions to be dictated by someone else."</p>	<p>Privacy</p> <p>Privacy is dimension of agency that is not merely about physical boundaries but also about maintaining control over what they consider private and belonging exclusively to them, describing as "everything that is personal whether material or intangible"</p>
<p>Responsibility</p> <p>Agency is not a privilege, "it puts burden" because it is often coupled with responsibility in a sense of "accountability" for decisions and outcomes on the personal level</p>	<p>Guardianship</p> <p>Agency is guardianship on the interpersonal level giving the example of a "father being responsible for his children and his wife."</p>	<p>Giving</p> <p>Agency is tied to the action of giving to others from what Allah has granted them. women explained that when someone benefits from their sense of agency, "they are expected to share – not withhold it"</p>
<p>Decision-making</p> <p>Agency is the ability to of making-decisions and choice "to refuse or accept" certain things, describing it as "the simplest and most basic form of agency."</p>	<p>Leadership</p> <p>Agency within the family "shouldn't be solely about control," but more about leadership that aligns with their perceived role as a "khalifah," or "Allah's representative on earth – the reason of their existence."</p>	<p>Planning</p> <p>Agency is the ability to perform planning "to develop what they own" when envisioning their future.</p>
<p>Control</p> <p>Agency is being in control over emotions, actions, reactions, lifestyle, tools, resources and also people including family.</p>	<p>Self-confidence</p> <p>Agency is the feeling of self-confidence that leads to "self-respect."</p>	<p>Awareness</p> <p>Agency requires awareness to know "how to handle it and manage it" effectively while recognizing its boundaries</p>

Figure 1: Meanings of agency identified and described by the participants.

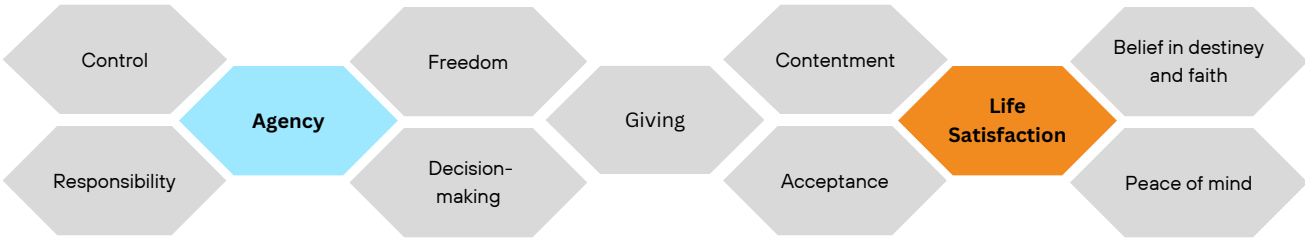
In addition to agency meanings, women identified multiple types of agency: over people, over finances and resources, over actions, over body and health, over thoughts, over time, and over feelings.

Life Satisfaction

Speaking of life satisfaction, respondents discussed 12 perceived meanings of this concept:

<p>Contentment</p> <p>Life satisfaction is a state of contentment, it is "knowing that not everything is available but one should be content with what is available." it is an "everlasting treasure."</p>	<p>Gratitude</p> <p>Life satisfaction is coupled with gratitude and praising the creator, which requires "reliance on Allah (Tawakkul) after exerting efforts."</p>	<p>Accomplishments</p> <p>Life satisfaction is associated with personal accomplishments, whether big or small, "achieving goals and solving problems."</p>
<p>Acceptance</p> <p>life satisfaction is a state of acceptance, "not to rebel against reality" and "acknowledging things and circumstances—regardless of whether one personally agrees with them or not."</p>	<p>Adaptation</p> <p>Life satisfaction is followed by coping and adaptation, described as the ability "to adjust based on the life conditions one is facing."</p>	<p>Giving</p> <p>Life satisfaction is all about giving. "As long as I can give what I'm able to—some people give money, others give emotional support, or physical help, or even a kind word. This kind of giving really brings contentment.</p>
<p>Belief in destiny & fate</p> <p>Life satisfaction is stemmed from the belief in destiny. One "should be satisfied with what they have been allocated by Allah" and "be certain that it is the best possible outcome for them."</p>	<p>Realistic expectations</p> <p>life satisfaction involves setting realistic expectations that help in "living reality within its true size."</p>	<p>Compromise</p> <p>Life satisfaction is embodied in the compromises and sacrifices one make for their beloved ones and "letting go of certain things."</p>
<p>Peace of mind</p> <p>Life satisfaction is a state of Peace of mind and being at comfort, when one is not being bothered by anything.</p>	<p>Self-reconciliation</p> <p>Life satisfaction is reaching a level of reconciliation that fosters inner peace and self-stability.</p>	<p>Happiness</p> <p>Life satisfaction is the feeling of happiness they feel having their families around.</p>

Women have also discussed different types of life satisfaction: satisfaction with oneself, with health, with others, with trials and hardships, with sustenance as well as with life’s reality and changes. The figure below illustrates the two constructs & core perceived meanings by participants:



Factors of Agency & Life Satisfaction

Regarding the influencing variables that impact sense of agency and life satisfaction, women suggested a set of factors in each session and determined whether they have positive or negative impact over the two concepts. The set of factors and categories are shown in the following table:

Category	Factors
Personal Assets	Money, Education, Health
Family & Interpersonal	Children, Husband, Relationships, Family support, Appreciation, Approval of Others, External Interference, Moral Support
Social & Cultural	Environment, Traditions & Customs
Structural & Political	Rights, External Circumstances, Refugee Status, Security
Spiritual	Faith and Belief, Love

Visual Analysis

Resulting from connecting the variables and assigning the relative positive or negative strengths of influence by the participants, four mental maps were generated, in this policy brief, we present two of these in Figure X. Based on graph theory analysis; the visualized maps order the variables according to their **centrality**, indicating the importance of each variable in the system. In addition, the maps show system’s positive and negative **drivers** being the most impacting variables on the system, as well as system **receivers** being the most impacted variables receiving influence.

Centrality of Factors

Across four sessions, among all factors listed by the participants, money, level of education, family-related variables, adopted traditions and customs, belief and fate, and the feeling of love arising from close relationships, were the most central and the most factors over the system of agency and life satisfaction.

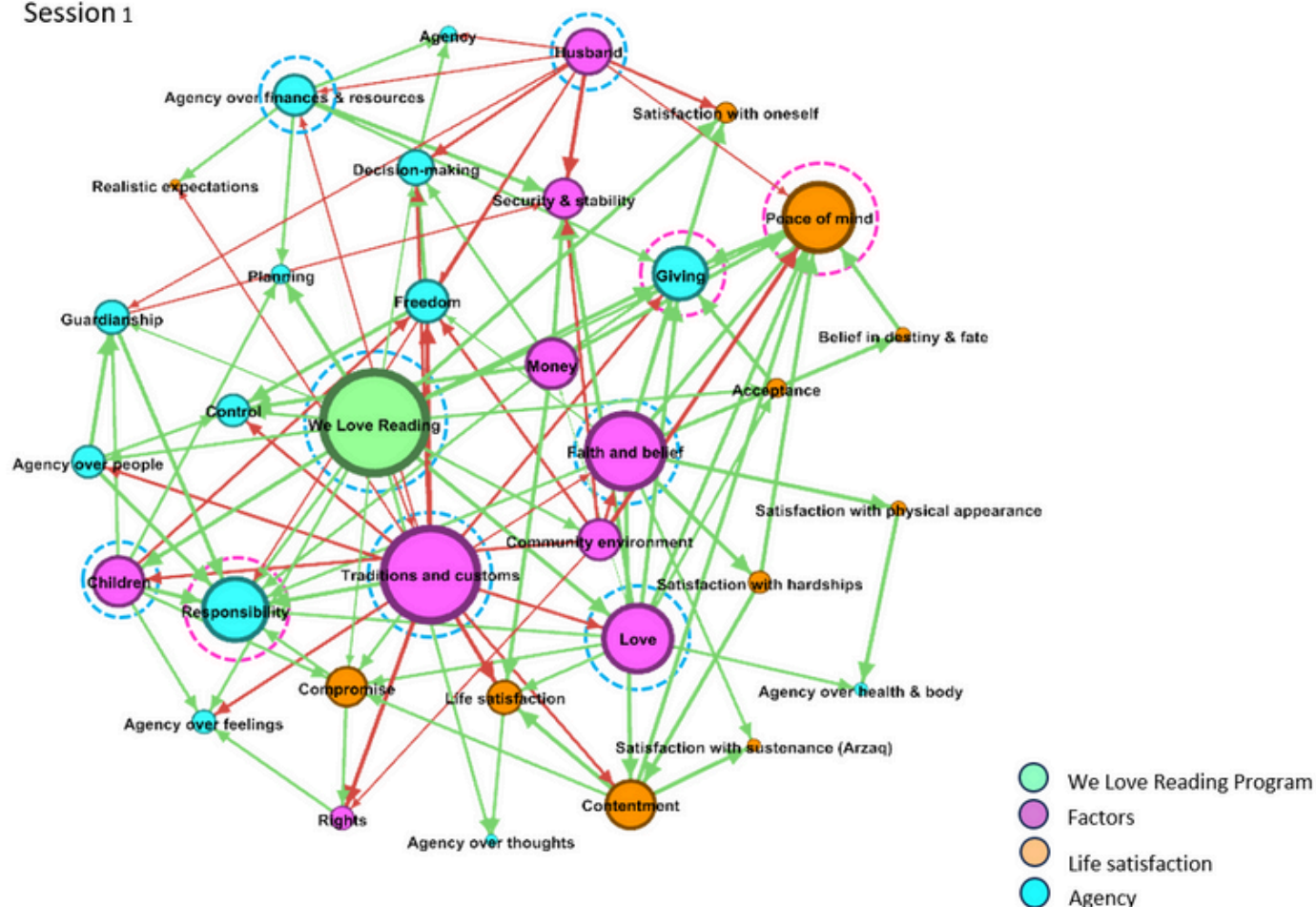
Agency Centrality

In the four sessions, the notions of responsibility, decision-making, control, privacy and self-confidence were the most central dimensions of agency to the system being highly impacted by the system. On the contrary, agency over people, finances, and over one's health was impacting the overall system, driving positive change.

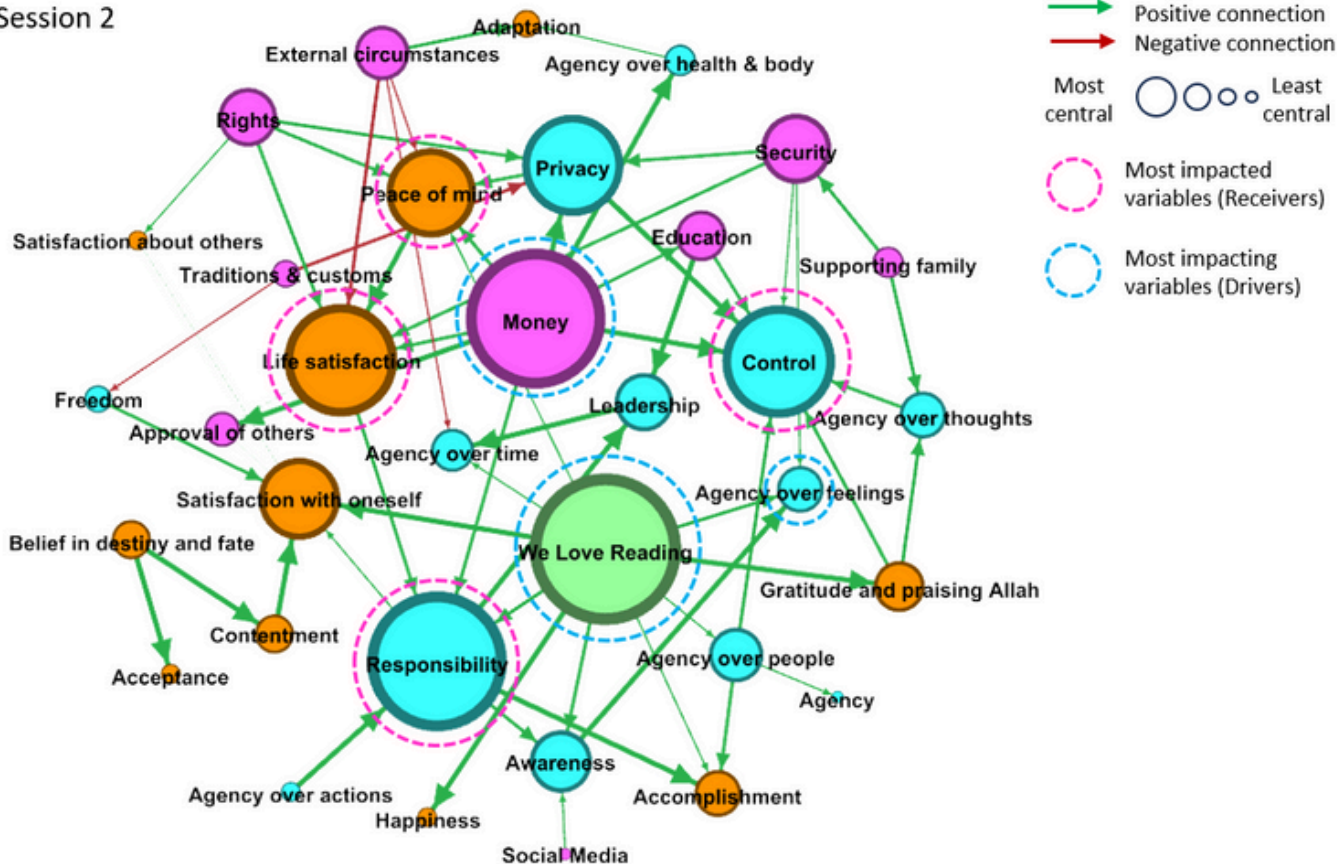
Life Satisfaction Centrality

Among dimensions of life satisfaction, peace of mind, satisfaction with oneself and the general life satisfaction were central to the participants being influenced by the other variables. On the other hand, one specific notion defined as dimensions of life satisfaction acted as a positive driver in the system, which was one's belief in destiny and fate.

Session 1



Session 2



We Love Reading and System Change

We Love Reading Program was introduced to the system as an interventional factor, to explore to which dimensions of agency and life satisfaction it has the most impact, and how it interacts with other factors in the system.

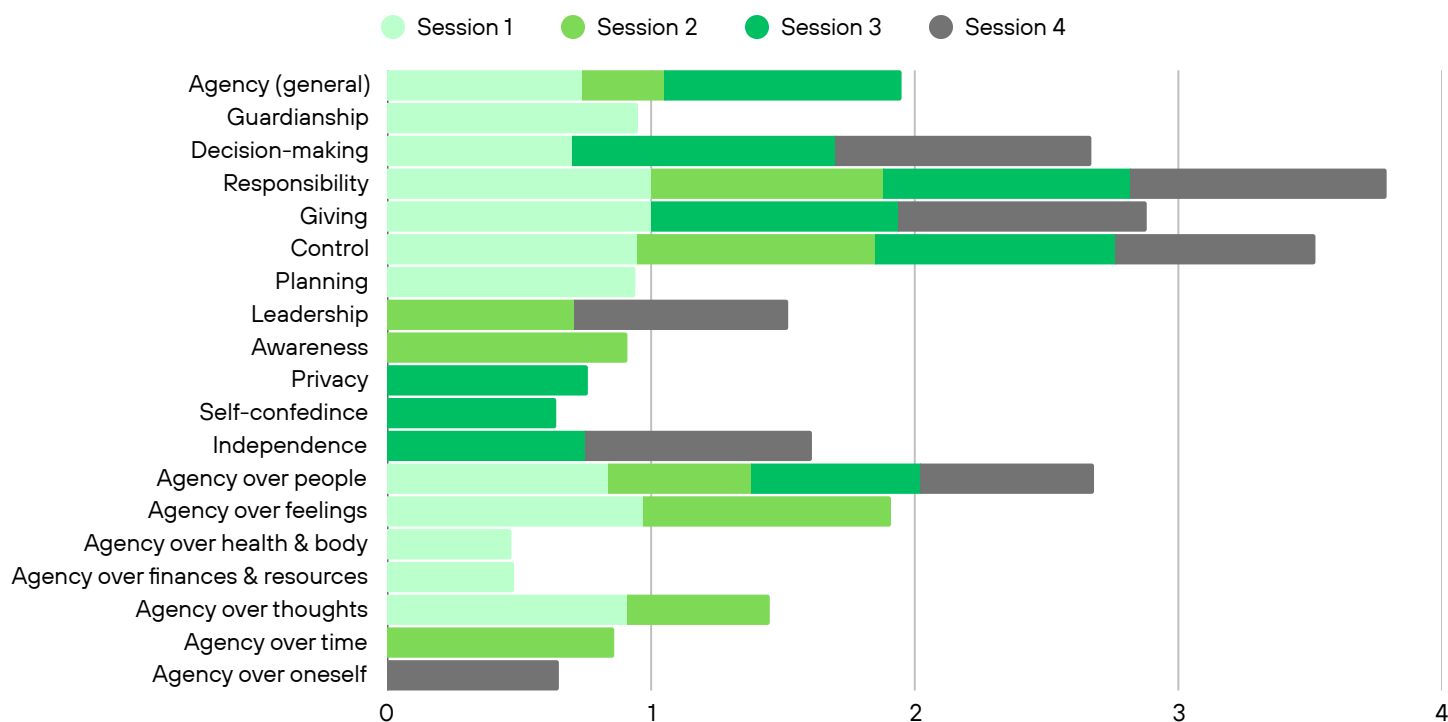
We Love Reading Impact on Agency & Life Satisfaction

We Love Reading was seen as a positive driver in the system and a central variable based on its perceived influence by the participants. Starting from the interpersonal level, WLR Ambassadors' engagement in read-aloud sessions fed their sense of responsibility toward their own children, families, and other children in their communities, reinforcing their relational agency over people—perceived as having the opportunity to communicate and, most importantly, the ability to have a positive influence on others through “changing attitudes,” “raising awareness,” “control guidance,” “delivering ideas,” “transfer life experiences,” and “influence actions,” all of which participants believed could happen through storytelling. Therefore, respondents linked the WLR program to the notion of giving—described as “a privilege,” being beneficial to community members and able to help, educate, and assist others. “You feel like you’re genuinely making a difference in their lives and giving them something meaningful.” For participants, giving was a rewarding feeling that filled them with gratitude.

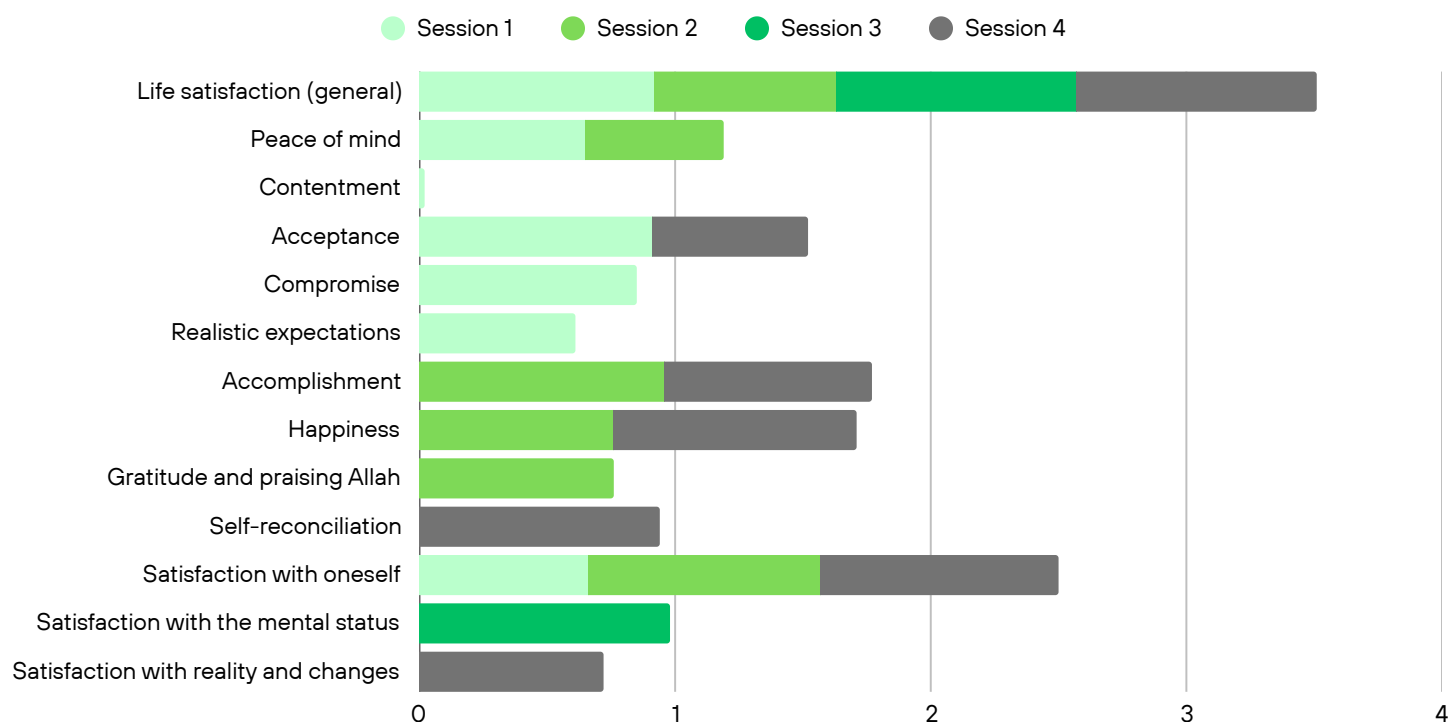
On a personal level, being in charge of decisions related to conducting the read-aloud sessions—whether timing, frequency, location, or storybook choice—and recognizing their positive influence both enhanced WLR Ambassadors' satisfaction with themselves and increased their self-confidence. Additionally, participants expressed that leading the read-aloud sessions was therapeutic; it contributed to their agency over their feelings and thoughts in a way that allowed them to express emotions, feel love, control anger, and release inner pressure and energy—all of which were possible through storytelling, bringing them peace of mind, happiness, and hope.

Scenarios of Change

One final step was to run “what if” scenario to predict system change. Using mental modeler, the aim of this step was to trace the cascading effect of the program once activated to its maximum value. As shown in Scenarios below, among the dimensions of agency and life satisfaction, the level of responsibility and satisfaction with oneself are predicted to receive the strongest positive influence. Interestingly, the cascading effect of We Love Reading on agency indicates a positive change in notions of control across all four maps, even though it was only directly linked to the WLR program in one of them. Similarly, the scenario shows that the general concept of life satisfaction was also the most impacted by the program's cascading effect, even though participants did not directly connect them in any of the maps.



Scenario A: We Love Reading's activation cascading effect on the dimensions of agency



Scenario B: We Love Reading's activation cascading effect on the dimensions of life satisfaction

The Second Study: Program Design & Evaluation

Because the second study aims to understand the process of developing and implementing a community-based intervention program, grounded theory analysis was applied to the semi-structured interviews to discover a theory rooted in the experiences and perceptions of participants.

The analysis revealed that the balance between informality and flexibility of the program on one hand and developing the necessary motivation and commitment on WLR Ambassadors in the other hand helped in long-term maintenance and sustainability.



Figure 1: The Balance between two relevant factors in order to achieve long-term program maintenance and sustainability

Program's Informality & Flexibility

Informality refers to volunteers not being bounded with structure, timeframe or systematic evaluation to conduct the read-aloud sessions. Flexibility is having an adaptable idea at the core of the program with the minimal set of requirements. Interviewees highlighted **positive consequences** of the program's informality and flexibility:

Creating a sense of ownership

Participants believed that autonomy and having the freedom to manage their contribution at their own pace enhanced the sustainability of WLR Program.

Cost-effectivity

Participants declared that there are no major costs needed after attending the training, the program attempts to use the minimal resources and cost which encourages the volunteers to commit because there is no financial burden.

Light structure for monitoring & evaluation

Participants indicated that the light evaluation and monitoring system was intentional in order not to burden WLR Ambassadors with keeping records of the read-aloud sessions, which saves their time and energy. On the other hand, Balanced follow-up and contact with WLR Ambassadors initiated by the WLR staff members is crucial to solidify volunteer motivation and commitment.

Volunteers Motivation & Commitment

Study participants indicated that volunteers who were motivated by a sense of duty and responsibility to their community maintained their involvement with the program. WLR Ambassadors were not recruited via monetary gain rather, participants believed they were joining because of a sense commitment to their community. Other ways to enhance volunteer motivation noted by the participants included looking at other WLR Ambassadors as role models and being credited for the success of the program rather than the organizational body itself. Participants discussed **factors** essential in enhancing volunteer motivation and commitment:

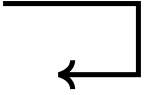
Root & derivation from local context

Many WLR Ambassadors revealed that their commitment in the program was strengthened by knowing of the program's origins and roots in their local context and not western-led, which was perceived as authentic and more in line with volunteers' values, traditions and beliefs.

Community engagement & impact

WLR Ambassadors Participants noted that their motivation was enhanced upon seeing engagement and witnessing immediate positive impact on different community members including children, parents and the volunteers themselves. this engagement offered solutions to potential challenges and helped sustain the read-aloud sessions, through spreading the news about the read-aloud sessions, providing new books or locations for the reading sessions to take place.

Conclusion



Takeaways

- Through a participatory approach combining both discussions and mental mapping, women indicated that We Love Reading enhanced multiple facets of agency, most importantly, their sense of responsibility, their self-confidence, their autonomy of making-decisions, their relational agency with people, and their agency over their own thoughts and feelings, as well as a cascading effect on the notion of control.
- Engagement in We Love Reading increased their levels of life satisfaction, specifically on the psychological level, the program has a positive impact on their satisfaction with themselves when they give back to the society, on their peace of mind, and on their feeling of happiness, which in return has a cascading effect on the general level of life satisfaction
- Women were able to robustly discuss complex constructs like agency and life satisfaction and provide original insights into the local knowledge.
- Informality and flexibility of the program created positive consequences including feelings of ownership in the volunteers and cost-effectiveness.
- Factors which increased motivation and commitment in volunteers and in turn enhanced program sustainability included the tangible community engagement and impact as well as the derivation of the program from the local context.

Recommendations

- Adopting community-based programs like We Love Reading by the family, community and at the national level, where reading for self and reading aloud for children becomes a strategy and a cultural habit, is essential for human flourishing and well-being.
- Evaluating the perceived benefits of community-based programs like We Love Reading through the eyes of volunteers is crucial for testing assumptions about local knowledge and the transformative power of these interventions.
- Demonstrating participatory approaches like Fuzzy Cognitive Mapping is important to unpack local knowledge and systematically explore casual reasoning and system change.
- Other programs aspire for a long-term sustainability can benefit greatly from understanding what motivates their volunteers. Investing in strategies that balance volunteers' motivation and commitment can help ensure overall success.
- Successfully implementing interventions in low- and middle-income countries requires tailoring programs to the local cultural context rather than simply translating existing models.

Resources



- The first study: We Love Reading program (2024). Unpublished data.

*Similar published studies about We Love Reading Program impact on sense of agency, life satisfaction and empowerment:

Tbaishat, D., Qtaishat, L., Eggerman, J. J., Panter-Brick, C., & Dajani, R. (2025). *Mapping the perceived impacts of a social innovation program on women's agency and life satisfaction*. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2025.1527841>

Panter-Brick, C., Qtaishat, L., Eggerman, J. J., Thomas, H., Kumar, P., & Dajani, R. (2024). *Volunteer programs, empowerment, and life satisfaction in Jordan: Mapping local knowledge and systems change to inform public policy and science diplomacy*. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 9, Article 1371760. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2024.1371760>

- **The second study:** Bakhti, R., Mareschal, I., El Kharouf, A., Dajani, R., Qtaishat, L., von Stumm, S., & Hadfield, K. (2024). *Exploring factors related to the development and implementation of a local intervention program for Syrian refugee children*. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2024.2428305>